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In defense of intelligence

Whether we like it or not, a democracy cannot survive without a good intelligence service. People who gather secret information are the eyes of those who make decisions. A President deprived of secretly-gathered foreign intelligence would be a blind man in the conduct of foreign affairs.

In his speech to the Economic Club of Detroit, Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA, made a conscious — and credible — effort to get that point across.

The admiral and his people are trying to win back the U.S. public support for the agency which has been in such bad odor in recent years.

The public was turned off by disclosures of CIA conduct, some of it clearly illegal, during the Watergate period. The functions of the agency were abused by people in power.

In that time of national recrimination, some people went to the extreme of suggesting the agency be disbanded and that the country get out of the shady spy business altogether.

Thus, "clandestine" became a dirty word.

The admiral, in his Detroit speech, said the CIA has developed technological spying to its highest degree ever and most military information is now

gathered by satellites capable of taking incredibly detailed photographs on a regular basis.

But, said the admiral, a satellite cannot tell the agency what people are thinking in Moscow or Peking or elsewhere. There remains a need for agents who gather information to enable U.S. experts to suggest answers to such questions.

The admiral concedes that there is a conflict in a society as open as this one over the public demand for disclosure and the intelligence need for secrecy. But, Turner argues, the country still has to have secret information to survive.

The CIA has always been efficient at gathering economic information overseas. Much of this is now being offered to the public and it is useful to businessmen and scholars.

The agency is therefore offering a visible benefit to the public, something tangible for the money spent on the agency. This kind of service will help rebuild public confidence in the CIA.

But, important as this is, the reports published openly by the CIA do not satisfy the agency's most critical function, which is to find out what is likely to hit the country, militarily, before the blow is struck.